

Duke, S. T. (2019). The importance of curriculum for student learning through education abroad: A message from the guest editor. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 30(4), 1-5.

The Importance of Curriculum for Student Learning Through Education Abroad: A Message From the Guest Editor

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Education Abroad has grown in popularity around the world, and it is estimated that more than four million students study outside of their home country each year. As the number of students studying abroad has increased, so have the formats and forms of curriculum that support student learning abroad. In addition to full-time enrollment at other universities, students now have opportunities to study abroad with faculty from their home university, participate in internships and overseas research, or enroll at program centers where courses are taught in their home language or the language of their host country. A variety of courses and models have been developed to guide students in their intercultural and interpersonal development.

Unfortunately, while data have been gathered about the numbers of students studying abroad (notably the *Open Doors* reports on U.S. study abroad conducted by the Institute of International Education), efforts to collect and analyze curriculum used in study abroad programs has lagged. The Forum on Education Abroad established a “Curriculum Toolbox” to enable member institutions to share curriculum internally. Nevertheless, more work is needed on the formats and impact of curriculum used in education abroad, both in the U.S. and around the world.

This special issue of the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* touches on a few of the courses, models and support mechanisms that colleges and universities in the U.S. have developed to enhance the student learning outcomes of education abroad experiences. While education abroad is now a global phenomenon, the articles selected for this issue through peer review all happen to address curriculum and student learning outcomes

of U.S. “outbound” study abroad programs. Despite this limitation, they represent a good variety of approaches to education abroad and student learning and development.

In recent years, a growing body of research on education abroad has focused on intercultural competence development and the impact of mentoring on students’ development of intercultural sensitivity. In the issue’s first article, **Daniel Jones, Michelle Campbell, and Kris Acheson** compare the effectiveness of one-on-one mentoring with group mentoring interventions and no mentoring for students who study abroad for a semester. Utilizing the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) for pre/post comparisons of students in three groups, they found that one-on-one facilitated interventions had the most impact on students in the study. Nevertheless, they argue that group interventions (courses led by trained intercultural facilitators) can provide a substantial solution where resources or trained personnel are in short supply. The authors describe how they carefully combined the mentoring activities with information from the IDI and AAC&U’s Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric in structuring support for students while they were studying abroad.

While Jones et al. focus on students studying abroad for a full semester, **Marianne Taylor and Wendelyn Shore** assess the impact of one-month study abroad experiences on students who traveled to London with them. Their article explores the process they followed for designing course learning objectives for their “Psychology of Expertise: London as a Case Study” course and the assignments they developed to help students meet those learning objectives. The authors describe using two team-based assignments as well as reflective essays for measuring student development. The article details how they used problem-based learning methodology with strategies to facilitate extensive interaction with British culture and people in order to help students develop expertise in topics of their choosing. A key feature of their course was helping students learn to monitor and assess their own process of learning, with positive results. Having students evaluate their own achievement of the course’s six learning objectives was another key feature of this innovative course and education abroad program.

Helping students to navigate cultural complexities and adjustments abroad is the focus of **Paige Butler’s** article. She has developed a new Cultural Transitions Model (CTM) that challenges education abroad professionals, program providers, and faculty leaders to replace old language and paradigms about “culture shock” with positive statements about how students experience cultural transitions. Rather than viewing

“culture shock” as an inevitable, negative, and disorienting experience, Butler argues how student development theory and practice demonstrate that students can be taught to view cultural transitions as positive. The CTM is a non-linear model that can be used with students both before, during, and after they study abroad.

The number of U.S. institutions that have chosen to require students to study abroad as part of their degree programs is increasing, according to **Mary Wright, Sandra Wiley, Elona Van Gent, and Monica Huerta**. They investigate how adding an “international experience requirement” to degree requirements affected students in a School of Art and Design. They compare students and student outcomes from students who entered the School the year before an international experience requirement was added with those who entered afterward. Students were surveyed as sophomores and as seniors and were asked to complete the Global Perspectives Inventory and submit artist statements. These authors concluded that students who were required to have an international experience saw greater gains than their peers who were not.

While assessing the impact of education abroad on students is now becoming commonplace, **Stephanie Claussen, Dhinesh Radhakrishnan, Casey Haney, Sally Kimani, Esther Wairimu, Wesley Kimutai, and Jennifer DeBoer** assert the importance of assessing the impact on host communities overseas. Their article investigates an engineering course developed to encourage engineering students to study in low- and middle-income countries while also being more sensitive to the impact of engineering solutions on local communities. The U.S. students in this study were paired with students in a Kenyan school to work on specified projects, with the goal of addressing challenges identified by the local community. Through three iterations of the course, the authors established a curriculum that enhanced students’ abilities to accomplish course goals while also developing cross-cultural effectiveness and humility. The principles they identified could be applied in other locations and disciplinary contexts.

In their article, **Grace Pai and Katie Wilson** describe how their two-year, Hispanic-Serving community college developed a culturally responsive assessment framework to measure the impact of education abroad on students. Although the authors’ community college is relatively small, the education abroad programs created at their college attracted almost 10% of its students within just a few years. The college launched a three-phase program model to support student learning before, during, and after international travel. It also developed a preparation program for faculty who teach abroad. Using ePortfolios and a group blog, students

were asked to reflect on their learning experiences, complete several surveys, and prepare to give presentations after returning home. The authors describe the “home grown” assessment framework that was created to monitor student learning using both direct and indirect measures. They conclude that assessment efforts should be designed to fit the needs of individual institutions, because doing so allows institutions to take action steps for improving programs and support structures.

One essential phase in education abroad is the preparation phase. In their article, **Kirsten Davis, Ashley Taylor, David Reeping, Homero Murzi, and David Knight** describe how they developed a home campus-based classroom intervention to promote cross-cultural communication based on Hofstede’s Model of National Culture. They discuss the development and implementation of a cultural simulation activity used in a semester-long course on global engineering that also prepared students for a two-week study abroad program. Using qualitative inquiry methods to assess the activity and implementation, the authors identified four common trajectories of student experiences: learning, learning with challenges, conflict, and conflict with insight. They note that students who study abroad bring their own life experience to the education abroad process and perceive their cross-cultural experiences in a variety of ways.

Another format for pre-departure preparation is described by **Carrie Wojenski**, who helped develop an online virtual exchange course involving pre-departure study abroad students and international students coming to the U.S. This “collaborative online international learning intervention” was designed to enhance students’ intercultural competence development and their engagement while abroad. Using computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) to create a virtual classroom, the author explored peer interaction as a social component of the preparation phase for education abroad. The goal was to develop a guided pre-departure intervention to assist students in learning how to interact effectively across cultures. The author found that the design of the intervention and the research tools used to evaluate effectiveness showed limitations, yet she identified key findings in terms of ways that the course could be revised in the future to improve its impact.

Overall, these articles reveal a sense of curiosity and creativity among faculty who lead education abroad programs and the professionals who support students and faculty studying abroad. Constructive work on student learning requires careful attention to the variety of ways such learning can be evaluated. It is clear that faculty who teach courses abroad should adjust these courses in order to help students learn about the local environment and its ways of knowing. Making education abroad curricu-

lum and instruction effective is an important long-term objective. As the authors included in this special issue demonstrate, significant work has already been done in this domain, yet more work remains. I invite the *Journal's* readers to contribute to this important effort.

References

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